

## Undocumented Immigrants and Policy Advocacy: Reasserting the Activist Roots of Social Work

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*The social work profession is positioned to play a critical role in redefining policies surrounding historically marginalized immigrants in the United States. The creation of the concept of the “undocumented immigrant” reflects an embedded discriminatory aspect of immigration policy, and becomes reinforced in policies that actively dehumanize undocumented immigrants, inhibiting their social integration. When the social origins of law cease to be recognized, the legal concept of the “undocumented immigrant” becomes understood as the result of law-breaking by the individual rather than as a socially constructed concept. Undocumented immigrants acknowledge that they have adapted to an American way of life, yet they do not feel they belong. Undocumented youth experience a shift from feeling a sense of belonging to feeling marginalized. The code of ethics shared by all social workers provides an ideal foundation for social workers to pursue roles as social justice activists. This paper makes two specific recommendations. First, national social work organizations should emphasize the history of social activism in social work. Second, social workers should develop skills to assert political views that embrace policy goals and advance social justice. By enhancing their capacity for policy change, social workers will realign with the profession’s activist roots.*

Immigration policies in the United States have historically marginalized undocumented immigrants (Furman, Ackerman, Loya, Jones, & Nalini, 2012). This marginalization has only intensified since the events of 9/11 (Furman, et al., 2012; Nielson, 2009). Immigration policies have become less welcoming as policymakers have begun to view immigrants “as potential terrorist suspects first and welcome newcomers second” (Tumlin, 2004, p.1175). This attitude has greatly influenced state policies, such as Arizona Senate Bill 1070 and California Proposition 187, as well as federal policies, such as Secure Communities. Policies like these target immigrants who enter the United States from its Southwest border with Mexico (Furman, et al., 2012), who the House Committee on Homeland Security (2007) asserted constitute “an ever-present threat

of terrorist infiltration,” and “are from countries known to support and sponsor terrorism” (p. 4). As a result of this sentiment, immigration has become increasingly criminalized, particularly for undocumented immigrants (Furman, et al., 2012). For example, Secure Communities allows United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to access state criminal databases to screen for undocumented immigrants, who are subsequently incarcerated and deported. Ultimately, through such policies, the legal rights necessary for economic and social success are purposefully withheld from undocumented immigrants.

Policies that criminalize immigrants prevail even in the face of studies that demonstrate greater economic benefits from education rather than deportation and/or incarceration (Baum & Ma, 2007; Meissner, Kerwin, Muzaffar, & Bergeron, 2013; Simpson, 2012). The disconnect between policy implementation and research suggests that policymaking in this realm is not always rooted in economic analysis, but in social sentiments. The gulf between policy practice and research results in the dehumanization of undocumented immigrants. The contextualization of their complex human experiences goes unacknowledged, and an immigrant’s criminalized, undocumented status becomes a defining aspect of her or his social identity.

The social work profession is positioned to play a critical role in redefining policies and attitudes surrounding historically marginalized immigrants in the United States. This paper will illuminate the social work profession’s capacity for such influence by examining the transformation of social work over time. It will shed light on how social workers can begin to redefine their roles to better aid undocumented immigrants through policy advocacy. This paper will also illustrate the real effects of immigration policy on daily social experiences of undocumented immigrants, and propose suggestions for incorporating these experiences in advocacy to humanize those most affected by immigration policy.

### **Immigration Policy Creating the Concept of “Undocumented”**

Law is a mechanism that normalizes social sentiment. “Law not only reflects society but constitutes it as well...law normalizes and naturalizes social relations and helps to structure the most routine practices of social life” (Ngai, 2004, p. 8). The emotional social climate in a particular society informs and influences legality; legal and social forces

mutually aid each other in creating certain norms. Consequently, law and policy influence how American society perceives immigrant groups. The creation of the “undocumented immigrant” concept reflects an embedded discriminatory aspect of immigration policy (Ngai, 2004). The negative social sentiment becomes reinforced in laws and policies that dehumanize undocumented immigrants, inhibiting their social integration.

The normalization of social sentiment through law can be problematic. The possible interpretation of law as independent of social forces, even though social meanings constitute law, presents danger. Disassociating law from its social origins may cause social constructions to become embedded in the daily meanings and routines of social life, and the biased, social nature of law may go unrecognized. When the social origins of law cease to be recognized, the legal concept of the “undocumented immigrant” becomes understood as the result of law-breaking by the individual rather than the result of social construction.

The combined legal and social exclusion does not necessarily go unnoticed by undocumented immigrants. One way they experience exclusion is through unwelcoming social climates at the community, state, and national levels in the form of political dialogues in the media. Ongoing debates on the legalization of undocumented immigrants, in which undocumented immigrants are unable to participate as representatives of their own interests or voice their own experiences, are dehumanizing. Other blatant measures of exclusion are laws that openly prohibit undocumented immigrants from legally accessing the workforce, welfare programs, medical services, and other rights, privileges, and opportunities reserved for citizens (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). Exclusion undeniably shapes the routines and interactions in many undocumented immigrants’ daily lives, through political processes that leave out their populations and through policies that create barriers to accessing services and claiming their rights.

### **The Feeling of Being Undocumented**

The ability of undocumented immigrants to feel social belonging in American society is largely influenced by the social reactions of their communities (Chavez, 1991). Legality is an integral, if unarticulated, part of the definition of social belonging for many Americans, and many undocumented immigrants are not accepted into their communities in part because they do not share legal status (Chavez, 1991). Throughout

the 1980s, Chavez (1991) conducted interviews with undocumented immigrants in the San Diego area and found that their local communities would draw lines of inclusion and exclusion by constructing and reinforcing negative social meanings around undocumented status, utilizing dehumanizing language towards this population. Name-calling through words such as “wetback” and “illegal alien” reinforced feelings of hostility and reaffirmed the belief that undocumented immigrants were not legitimate members of American society (Chavez, 1991). In recent years, the deportation of almost two million undocumented immigrants during the Obama Administration has further alienated undocumented immigrants and torn apart families (Fineman, 2013). In recent years, more than 200,000 deported undocumented immigrants reported that they were parents to children who are American citizens; many of these children live in constant fear of their parents’ deportations (Planas, 2012). The identification of undocumented immigrants by one aspect of their person that holds negative connotations creates difficulty for communities to see immigrants beyond their undocumented status and for immigrants to develop a sense of belonging. Oftentimes, undocumented immigrants identify their undocumented status as “the reason they did not feel part of the community” (Chavez, 1991, p. 272) and acknowledge that although they have adapted to an American way of life, they still do not feel as though they belong.

The experience of undocumented children perhaps best demonstrates how social climate influences feelings of social belonging. Oblivious to the hostile social climate toward undocumented immigrants, undocumented children initially have a sense of belonging in American society (Chavez, 1991; Gonzales, 2011). They go to school, participate in school-based activities, learn to speak English as part of their public presence, and are exposed to popular culture like any other American children (Gonzales, 2011). It is not until they are older that they realize American society does not recognize them as legitimate members, and that it views them as undocumented immigrants rather than Americans (Abrego, 2006; Chavez, 1991; Gonzales, 2011). Undocumented youth experience a shift from feeling a sense of belonging to feeling alienated and marginalized (Abrego, 2006; Chavez, 1991; Gonzales, 2011).

There are various catalysts that instigate this shift in undocumented youth from feelings of belonging to alienation. The transition is often triggered when youth are unable to participate in a coming-of-age

event that most legal American youth experience, such as acquiring a driver's license, applying for a job, or going to college (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzales wrote, "as [undocumented youth] came to grips with the new meanings of [undocumented] status, they began to view and define themselves differently" (2011, p. 610). After growing up feeling included in American society, the realization of the extent of their exclusion can induce shock. Oftentimes, there are two stages of shock (Gonzales, 2011). First, the youth experience a multitude of emotions ranging from "confusion, anger, frustration, and despair" (Gonzales, 2011, p. 610), after which they feel overwhelmed. The second shock occurs as they realize the permanence of the exclusion from society and that nothing, short of their legalization, can overcome it. Previous aspirations are lost and the future begins to look similar to the lives of their parents, who often try to make ends meet in labor-intensive jobs that require little skill and pay low wages.

### **How Legal Status Influences Feelings of Social Belonging**

Not being accepted by their communities denotes the complexity of what it means to be part of American society. Social belonging relies on legal status as well as on the social constructions around that status. These meanings establish alienation experienced by undocumented immigrants and can have grave effects on their life experiences. The feeling that comes from losing one's sense of belonging is described by undocumented youth as, "waking up to a nightmare" and being unable to escape (Gonzales, 2011).

To address feelings like these, and the situation from which they arise, America needs a political discourse that accurately illustrates the life-altering experience resulting from the social exclusion of undocumented immigrants. A humanizing dialogue that identifies and describes these feelings of alienation and brings visibility to the hopelessness of undocumented immigrants should inform immigration policy. Policy advocacy based on integrating the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants holds promise to balance traditional social forces that would otherwise reaffirm their marginalized status.

## **Relevance of Social Work to Policy Advocacy**

### **Professionalization of Social Work Inhibits a Progressive Policy Agenda**

When the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008) was established in 1960, it officially held social workers responsible for “pursu[ing] social change with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.” The historical context of the social work profession and its legal obligation to marginalized groups provide an exceptional foundation for social workers to serve as policy advocates for the interests of undocumented immigrants. In spite of these attributes, the role of social workers as policy advocates has not been fully realized.

Abramovitz (1998) has argued that social work as an organized political force has become neutralized over time due to its professionalization. “Social work [has] often [been] accused...of serving as a handmaiden of the status quo” (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 512). Instead of facilitating social change, many social workers have perpetuated an oppressive system by teaching the oppressed how to manage and live within the system rather than create new spaces outside the system, or a new system altogether. This professionalization “pressed social work to narrow its vision and to play it safe” (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 518). To be considered a more esteemed profession, social work has, in some ways, conformed to a market economy that requires public and private funders who exert conservative influences on the profession, thereby restricting a socially liberal agenda (Abramovitz, 1998; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989).

Additionally, the conservative political climate throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prevented many progressive social work practices and denounced the few practitioners of such practices as “radicals” (Katz, 1996). In many cases, this prevented the establishment of strong, long-term, progressive leadership in the social work profession (Katz, 1996). Professionalization in this field, however, does not have to continue to compromise social justice ideals. Social workers can maintain professional legitimacy and still honor their social activist roots.

## **Recommendations for Social Workers**

Social workers practice directly with undocumented immigrants and often their citizen children in capacities that address the barriers to employment, medical services, food, housing, and other needs (Semple, 2011). Furthermore, social workers have historically been perceived as agents of social justice with a duty to uphold values that “emphasize the importance of individual worth and dignity and service to humanity” (Bisman, 2004, p. 112; Siporin, 1982). The Code of Ethics shared by all social workers serves to provide an ideal foundation for social workers to pursue roles as social justice activists. As this profession looks forward to its role in the future, it should focus on overcoming oppressive systems by creating the necessary policy foundation through advocacy that establishes a new, humanizing discourse. It must advocate for the voices of undocumented immigrants to emerge. With this vision, social work should always look back to its history as a profession rooted in social activism.

Based on this underpinning, two specific recommendations for actions social workers should take to strengthen their capacities for policy advocacy can be made. First, national social work organizations, like the NASW, and associated publications should emphasize the history of social activism in social work and release statements in response to contemporary social issues that reaffirm social justice ideology without regard for political reactions (Abramovitz, 1998; Bisman, 2004). Second, social workers should develop skills to assert political views that align with the values of the profession and embrace policy goals that work towards social justice (Abramovitz, 1998). The NASW could organize workshops and policy coalitions that develop the necessary skills and organizational base to visibly advocate for social reform. The great advantage of the social work community is its passion, energy, and willingness to actively support social issues. These strengths should be utilized in the form of organized social action for policy reforms.

Within these recommendations, what is most essential is that social work, as a professional institution, asserts itself as an entity unconstrained by political influences that may otherwise divert it from its social justice vision. Although social workers will need to openly support certain policies and political initiatives, it will always be in the spirit of social justice.

## Conclusion

Undocumented immigrants report an oppressive social experience caused by emotional upset and permanent barriers to opportunity and fulfillment. These barriers cannot be rectified on an individual basis, or negotiated at the micro-level. Only through changes in national policy that address the absence of legal status can the marginalization of undocumented immigrants begin to be reversed. The degree to which undocumented immigrants have been alienated through the creation of policy based on exclusionary social forces is a lesson that attests to the power of social sentiment in policymaking. The key to developing policy that establishes legal spaces for undocumented immigrants is to humanize them by bringing out their social experiences as an empathetic social force. Social workers, by the nature of their profession, should be an integral part of the creation of this humanizing policy dialogue. The progressive social values that underlie the social work profession and its emphasis on individual human experience, position social workers as ideal advocates for undocumented immigrants in the policy arena. By enhancing their capacity for policy change, social workers will realign with their activist roots. As this profession pushes the boundaries of current social reform to achieve social justice, the ideals of social justice will no longer be just words that compose a professional creed, but rather values that are lived each day through work.

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